

Speak, Lord

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1 Samuel 3:1-10; John 1:43-51

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

January 17, 2021 – Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend

Friends, we are living through a difficult, painful, and extraordinary time in our country. In the wake of the violent assault by rioters at the US Capitol recently and threats that continue to swirl, with the deep polarization in our country, there can be a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, confusion and fear. What is the right next step for us? Where do we go from here? How are we going to move forward together? These are questions that are being asked and debated around dinner tables, in Session meetings, in online gatherings, in individual devotions, in therapist and counseling sessions, in casual conversations in the street and over FaceTime and on the phone. Pessimistic people may be saying, "It can't be fixed. Our system is just too broken. There's too much division." Optimistic people may be saying, "We can figure this out together." Some of us may find ourselves saying both of those at different times, so that we oscillate between pessimism and optimism, and sometimes that oscillation can depend on things like whether the sun happens to be shining that day or whether it's overcast and gloomy outside.

But I've gotta tell you. These are times when we realize why the church gathers for worship, and why the church gathers to hear God's word in Scripture. And God bless the lectionary, for as bureaucratic and confining as it can sometimes feel to have the Scripture texts for a particular Sunday assigned to you by the lectionary, on more occasions than I can keep track of, the lectionary's assignment of texts turns out to feel more like a gift. For in moments like now, when we may feel like we are fumbling around for what to do next; when we are trying to figure out what strategy is going to produce the best result, but it can seem like every strategy is fraught with risks and problems; when some people are shouting that they know what needs to happen and other people are wanting to just stay in bed until the storm has passed; when there are people willing to take up violent force to try and get their way; in moments like this, we are given an ancient story from 1 Samuel 3 about young Samuel. This story, that Connie just read for us, is itself situated in a time of public failure, when the institutions of ancient Israel were exhausted and broken, when in the language of our text 'the word of the Lord was rare and visions were not widespread,' and young Samuel's posture – which is offered to us as a model – was to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

In this story, Samuel's mentor is the priest Eli, who is presented as something of a priest in decline. Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas (who are also priests), are described

as scoundrels, corrupt religious leaders, incapable of, and uninterested in, leading the people to follow God. Eli is depicted as incapable of restraining and correcting his corrupt sons. It was not an inspiring time, and Eli is not an inspiring figure.

But when little Samuel comes to Eli, wondering about the voice that is awakening him in the night, Eli shows that the light of discernment has not completely gone out in him. "Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy," we read in verse 8. Even though the message from God, given in verses 11-20, would be a harsh word of judgment for Eli's priestly family, Eli guides young Samuel to pay attention to the voice of the Lord. So that the mentor, who was in decline and had been something of a disappointment, turns out to play a crucial role in the story.

"Speak, Lord." In a time where some of us can be tempted to poll-test every word that comes out of our mouths; in a time where others of us can be tempted to think that, if there is a leadership vacuum, then we need to rush in and fill it; in a time where some of us can despair that we'll ever be able to figure out where to go from here, this story brings us back to where we need to *begin*, where we need to *stay*, and where we will one day *end*: in patiently waiting for God's voice to lead us where to go. We can ask this individually; we can ask it in small groups, we can ask it in our families; we can ask this as a Session, as a Board of Deacons/Stephen Ministers, as Ministry Groups and committees, as a congregation, as neighborhood groups; as students, as young adults, as middle-aged and older adults; as a local community, country, and world – we can ask, "God, what is the next right step for us? What are you wanting us to do next? Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening."

Recently Lizzy Steel shared with me a book they are reading in one of her classes at Princeton Seminary, entitled *Everywhere You Look: Discovering the Church Right Where You Are*, by Tim Soerens. In it, Soerens writes that the first, and the essential, question for the church is "What is God up to right now? What is God's dream for our country, what is God's dream for our community?" The first and essential question for the church is not to anxiously ask how can we get more people to come to our programs or our services – questions which put us and our efforts at the center and keep us in control – but to ask "What is God already doing in our time, and how can we join in and participate in what God is already doing in our country, in our world, in our community, in our neighborhoods?" To paraphrase Isaiah 40, our efforts will eventually wither and fade, but God's healing dream of the beloved community will stand forever.

If we do not start where young Samuel started, by saying, "Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening," if we assume that we already know what needs to happen – especially if what needs to happen just happens to coincide with what *we* want to occur, and all that remains is for us to force that to happen; if we don't start by asking God to lead us, then we may well get caught in an anxious, dualistic mindset where those who disagree with us will be seen as enemies who must be eliminated rather than as neighbors whom we are called to love. We may find ourselves with Nathanael at the

beginning of our gospel story from John 1, where his own ideological blinders had him convinced that nothing good could come out of Nazareth – rather than with Nathanael at the end of the story, where he laid down his prejudices and acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as the One to follow. Now, some may think that the call to prayer is a pious way to avoid getting involved and imagines that we should just get everyone to sing Kumbaya, but if we do not begin in prayerful listening for the leading of God, if we do not ground our decisions and our actions in prayer at every step, then our actions may not have staying power, we may not have the grace and the nimbleness of heart to make necessary changes to our decisions along the way, we may fall into despair if things don't unfold the way we want, and we run the risk of following our own agendas rather than serving God's agenda.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, when we honor and remember the ministry and legacy of Dr. King, one of God's servants who – like the rest of us – was not the Messiah, but who – like the rest of us – was a servant of the Messiah, on this weekend when we give thanks to God for what he taught us about God's dream of the beloved community, when we give thanks for the ways that he urged and moved our country – in the face of great opposition, threat, and violence; violence which sought him out and killed him – how he urged and move our country on the path towards that beloved community, we remember that the point of this weekend is not only to look back at him and what he did. The point is to look at ourselves in our time and to ask what is ours to do, and to ask how we ought to do it. What is God calling us to do next? How is God calling us to stand against the chaos and the fear without being co-opted and distorted by the chaos ourselves?

Friends, as you sit today with these stories, with Samuel and Eli, with Nathanael and Philip, with Jesus and with the voice of God that comes to us, where do you need to stop and say to God, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Where in your life do you need to hear God's voice, showing you what your next step is? What is the next thing that God is wanting you to do, wanting us to do, to participate in God's work of building the beloved community in this time and in this place? May God speak God's word of grace and mercy, God's word of justice, truth, and clarity, God's word of life and renewal, to us and to our world. Amen.